

Memories of my day with the S.P.A.B. Tour of Cambridgeshire mills

notes compiled by Peter Mobbs

In June I joined the tour of Cambridgeshire mills organized by the Mills group of SPAB where we visited windmills at Over, Upware, Wicken, Soham, and Swaffham Prior.

We met at Huntingdon Railway Station and transport was in a luxury coach which was extremely comfortable; however, we were deprived of the compact and “togetherly” feeling that we are accustomed to when riding the minibus on our Hampshire Mills Group tours.

Weather conditions were just perfect for our visit, with a copious supply of sunshine and a stiff breeze which meant that many of the mills were operational. It was the first occasion that I have been fortunate enough to see a windmill at work grinding flour. I felt that the experience was truly spectacular. It was somewhat scary to be in such close proximity to the ponderous rotating cog wheels rotating and hear the subdued creaking noise that emanated from them. Health and safety did not appear to be high on the list of priorities for Millwrights of the day!

Because of the bright sunshine it was possible to see the clouds of flour dust rising from the millstones. I was informed by the experts that the milling conditions had been set perfectly but I was amazed by the acrid smell generated by the millstones. I have been told that flour dust is explosive. A vivid mental vision appeared to me of an imminent binding flash followed by a loud boom which at the very least would have singed our hair and certainly make us jump!

Previously I had assumed that the combined input of patent sail mechanisms and Watts governor would keep the stones turning at a reasonably constant velocity. So another surprise for me was how erratic the speed of the stones was, due to variations in wind velocity. This confirmed my opinion that the Hampshire watermills are a much more dependable source of power than the windmills of Cambridgeshire!

At **Over Windmill** we saw a very innovative facility: this mill was modified during its working life with the provision of an external shaft drive to enable the machinery to be driven by a belt drive from an external engine. The current owner had erected a small custom-built workshop, next to the mill, housing a lathe, pillar drill and band-saw. These machines were driven by overhead line shafting running along the apex of the workshop passing through the end wall terminating in a pulley wheel. Now it is possible to power the workshop machines using a belt drive from the existing mill external drive to the workshop line shafting. This arrangement enables virtually all machining operations, required to maintain the Windmill, to be carried out using renewable wind energy from the mill itself. I was most impressed by this installation!

Also on the itinerary was the fascinating **Glebe (Organic) Farm at Kings Ripton**, where we learned that the land is now managed using organic methods; the use of high nitrogen fertilizers is not permitted so the farm is managed on a rotation system with a clover crop grown to “fix” nitrogen which enhances the soil fertility; then a grain crop may be grown and any unacceptable damage to the crop is limited by adequate pest control. I felt that the surroundings were much more attractive than the vast areas of huge sterile looking fields that we passed by during our tour.

In conclusion I wish to thank SPAB for providing such a well organized visit. And finally I wish to thank the many friendly knowledgeable mill enthusiasts on my visit. They patiently answered the numerous simple minded questions posed by a not too clever amateur that I am!

